

Humanism of Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 primarily for his *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* was a versatile genius. Although Tagore was primarily a poet, and he said on one occasion that he entered into his real self when he wrote poetry, his genius touched every branch of literature – novel, drama, short story, critical essays, travelogues and autobiographical writings. The only literary form that he did not experiment with is the epic. But it would not be wrong to say that through his highly eventful career and inexhaustible creativity spanning eight decades, he virtually lived an epic though he did not write any.

Tagore was not a cloistered artist. This myriad-minded poet was as much a man of contemplation as of action. He was a distinguished educationist and a social thinker. He was a painter who was also a musician. He was an internationalist but he never lost sight of the ground realities of the country. About him it has been said that like Shakespeare and Goethe he could replace a whole culture and in all his writings and actions he left the indelible stamp of humanism. Like the Renaissance humanists he believed that man is at the centre of the universe and all our thoughts and actions should be governed by our sincere solicitations for the welfare of man.

Humanism is the hall mark of the total Tagore. Whether he wrote about the unity of man, or nationalism and internationalism, about the woman question or about environmental awareness, about untouchability and religion or about education, about colonialism or exploitation and violence, about music or painting, dance or drama, about rural reconstruction or cooperative farming it is always marked by the spirit of humanism. As a humanist Tagore believed in the essential unity of man and the universality of the mind. To him the mind was more important than matter and under no circumstances should the mind be fettered by religion, materialism, greed or power etc. He believed: “Uniformity is not unity. Those who destroy the independence of other races destroy the unity of all races of

humanity” (EWT 6: 579). He was critical if not contemptuous of the kind of unity that is claimed by Imperialism. In a sarcastic tone of ruthless banter he remarked: “Modern Imperialism is that idea of Unity, which the python has in swallowing other live creatures” (ib.). It is true that people as individuals have distinctive differences in many respects: in physiognomy, complexion, passions and prejudices but these differences are never inimical to the attainment of the universality of the mind. In other words the universality of mind is manifested in the infinite variety of individual differences. In this connection Tagore had once said to H.G.Wells: “Our individual physiognomy need not be the same. Let the mind be universal. The individual should not be sacrificed” (ib. 8: 1237). And he regretted in “Nationalism in the West”: “The history has come to a stage when the moral man, the complete man, is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the political and the commercial man, the man of the limited purpose”(ib. 4: 448).

The same concern for individual freedom is evident in his observations on the freedom of Europe – a kind of freedom which is not conducive to the development of the moral man. Tagore writes in “India and Europe”: “The freedom that Europe has achieved today in action, in knowledge, in literature and in art, is a freedom from the rigid inanity of matter. The fetters that we forge in the name of religion, enchain the spiritual man more securely than even worldly ties. The home of freedom is in the spirit of man. That spirit refuses to recognize any limit to action or to knowledge” (ib. 7: 845). His anxiety in the lack of moral links that can hold together the civilization is evident in his letter to Gilbert Murray where he writes:

... I find much that is deeply distressing in modern conditions, and I am in complete agreement with you again in believing that at no other period of history has mankind as a whole been more alive to the need of human cooperation, more conscious of the inevitable and inseparable moral links which hold together the fabric of human civilization. I cannot afford to lose my faith in this inner spirit of Man, nor in the sureness of human progress which following the upward path of struggle and travail is constantly achieving, through cyclic darkness and doubt, its ever widening ranges of fulfillment. (Ib. 6: 455).

This faith is reaffirmed in his letter to Yone Nogichi where he writes: "Humanity in spite of its many failures, has believed in a fundamental moral structure of society" (ib. 8: 1140). Tagore had a feeling that the kind of human civilization that is prevailing in Europe is essentially a political civilization which is scientific but not human. It is based upon exclusiveness.

He says in "Nationalism in Japan":

The political civilization which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed, is based upon exclusiveness. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future....*This political civilization is scientific, not human.* It is powerful because it concentrates all its forces upon one purpose, like a millionaire acquiring money at the cost of his soul. (ib. 4: 472. Emphasis added).

To Tagore man is of the highest importance and the welfare of man is the most important thing. And by welfare he means the development of man in his fullness into a complete man. He believed that human society is "the best expression of man, and that expression, according to its perfection, leads him to the full realization of the divine in humanity" (ib. 4: 565). Mulk Raj Anand was right when he pointed out that when Tagore says in his 'Conversations with Einstein' that the truth of the Universe is human truth, "he means that he is interested in concrete human beings and not in abstract man" (In Chaudhuri 6). The human existence, for Tagore, is essentially co-existence. And this co-existence simultaneously operates on two levels; communication and communion. Communication takes place at an external, functional level. But communion that binds man to man and unites people in the universality of mind is inward and is bound not by any material need but by love. Love is an organic desire and it is not only the means of one's communion with others but also the means of fulfilment of oneself, and the fullest realization of the inherent potentialities that find expression in different forms. Tagore writes in "Personality":

The feeling of perfection in love, which is the feeling of the perfect oneness, opens for us the gate of the world of the Infinite One, Who is revealed in the unity of all personalities; who gives truth to sacrifice of self, to death which leads to a larger life, and to loss which leads to a greater gain; who turns the emptiness of renunciation into fulfilment by his own fullness. (EWT 4: 385).

It is not for nothing that the writings of Tagore are replete with glorification of love and paeans sung in its celebration. In one of his famous songs he says: “Why are you sitting alone confined to yourself? Fill your empty life with love... and see how the stream of joy flows around the world”. What the contemporary world needs most today is love in a profound sense.

Tagore concedes: “We must admit that evils there are in human nature, in spite of our faith in moral laws and our training in self-control” (ib. 4: 631). Men are children of God, *amrtasya putrāh*, and therefore the glory of man consists in his endeavours and ability to transcend the evil and reach the God head and experience the universality of mind. But the parochial notions of nationalism and, more blatantly, colonialism let loose the potential evils which find expression in all kinds of violence. And the great humanist as Tagore is he has been deeply pained whenever there is an act of violence irrespective of the place where it occurs and has raised a strong voice of protest. Thus Tagore reacted sharply when the British force attacked China and was engaged in rampage, looting and arson and devastated three cities. In this connection he wrote in *Naivedya* (1901): “The sun of the century set down in bloody clouds. We hear the clanking of swords in the death dance of insane violence.” And again he wrote in *Prāntik* 18 (RR 3: 546) in 1937: “The poisonous snakes are hissing around everywhere; talk about peace will sound like a mockery”. Also, in the same year:

The day my sense was liberated from the dungeon of oblivion, it brought me to the brink of the ocean of hell fire in midst of some unbearable, turbulent storm. It was breathing the hot smoke of man’s insult and it was polluting the atmosphere with sounds of evil. I saw the foolish and suicidal madness of this age and the signs of ugly perversions. (*Prāntik* 17. RR3:545).

Tagore was a great admirer of Raja Rammohun Ray, an eminent social reformer and was very much influenced by his ideas of social equality and attitude to women. A humanist and a very sensitive soul Tagore saw how the women suffered in the patriarchal Indian society and became victims of various forms of exploitation – economic, social and cultural, and he carried a life – long crusade against the atrocities perpetrated on the helpless women. In his writings – poems, plays and novels – his liberal and humanistic ideas about women are embodied in characters and situations. We hear the voice of female protest in the poem “Sabalā” (The strong woman, 1928). In “Aprakāś” (Unrevealed, 1932) the poet exhorts the woman to tear the veil and come out into the open. In “Kyameliā” (Chamelia, 1932) a young girl when pursued by a young man takes care of herself and the man admits: “That girl herself can take care of herself” (RR 3:49)

In the poem “Niṣkṛti” (Release 1918. RR 2: 543–550) Manjulika, a very young girl is given in marriage to the 55 years old Panchanan, much against the will of her mother. Majulika’s mother, however, had wanted to marry her daughter to one doctor Pulin who was a play mate of Manjulika during her childhood days. Soon after the marriage the girl becomes widow, and returns to her parents’ place. A few years later her mother also dies and she devotes all her attention to the care of her father, a widower now. But after some time his father decides to marry again. The girl does not like it; she protests. But the father stubbornly sticks to his decision and puts forward some scriptural recommendations in support of his decision, and says, “All the scriptures right from Manu to the Mahabharata say that domestic duties remain unfulfilled if one does not marry”. This time the girl who had made a verbal protest earlier takes an action. She marries Pulin during the absence of her father. From the feminist point of view the poem is significant in many ways. It shows the double standard of the society in regard to men and women, the exploitation of women, even when she is one’s own daughter in the household, in complete disregard of her emotional and biological needs. But what is remarkable about Tagore is the courage of conviction in getting the widow married and that too, to a person of her choice in 1918 when Western feminism was still a long way off.

A cursory look at his plays also reveals his concern with the woman question which must be seen as a function of Tagore's humanism. Vasanti in *The Ascetic*, Aparna in *Sacrifice*, Chitra in *Chitra* and Prakriti in *Chandalika* bear testimony to Tagore's insight into the feminine mind and his concern for the position of women in the society. Devjani in *Kacha* and *Devjani* refuses to surrender to male domination. The concern for the 'woman question' also underscores the stories like "The Deal" (1891), "Punishment" (1893) "The Judge" (1894), "Atonement" (1894), and "The Wife's Letter" (1914) Though the last one, "The Wife's Letter" is written in the form of a long letter from the wife to her husband it is included in the collection of stories and it is a serious vindication of the woman's cause.

Another important aspect of Tagore's humanism which has a great relevance to the contemporary global situation is his concern for the subaltern. Tagore carried a life-long crusade against untouchability and the discrimination against the poor and the down trodden. All his writings bear eloquent testimony to his sincere solicitations for them. Taraknath Sen refers to an episode recorded by Nirmalkumari Mahalnobis. Tagore was "telling of his experiences in Bengal villages; and she found him shedding tears as he spoke feelingly of the sufferings of the villagers witnessed with his own eyes, due to scarcity of drinking water" (Sen. 150). In the poem, "The Unfortunate Country" (1911 RR 2: 283-284) he warns them that a time will come for retribution. He writes: "You will have to face the same insult that you have inflicted on others since you have deprived them of their human rights and you have forced them to keep on standing without drawing them into your fold a time is sure to come when you will be equal with them in humiliation."

Tagore believed that God resides in the heart of man. To hate a man is to hate the god in him. In another poem "The Temple of Dust" (1911) Tagore tells the ascetic that there is no point in worshipping God in the closed room of the temple. Tagore says that God does not reside in the temple. God is in the field where the peasant works hard round the year and tills the soil after breaking the earth, and where the workers break the stones to make a path. There God is with them in all the weathers and His hands are full of dust.

He writes: "Leave aside your prayers, worship, penance and supplications. Why are you wasting your time sitting alone in the temple barring the doors? Hiding in the dark whom are you searching so secretly? If you open your eyes you will discover that God is not there in the room. He has gone to the field where the farmer is tilling the soil and cultivating the land He is there where the worker is breaking stones to make a path labouring all the year round. He is there with them in all the seasons. His hands are covered with dust. Discard the sacred cloth and come out like Him to the field"" (RR 2:291).

Obviously Tagore's idea of religion stems from the same belief in the dignity of man and man's rightful place in the world. A radical humanist in the true sense of the term Tagore believed that every individual has a distinct identity, a dignified place in the world and each has a divine spark in him or her. He is reported to have told Humayun Kabir that "just as every cell in the human body has a distinct life of its own and yet shares in the corporate life of the body, each human being has his uniqueness and is at the same time a part of the divine personality" (Centenary Volume 145). In "Religion of Man" Tagore writes: "It is significant that all great religions have their historic origin in persons who represented in their life a truth which was not cosmic and unmoral, but human and good (EWT 5:136). God, to Tagore, is not just an abstract idea, enshrined in an Olympian altitude cut off from the activities of human life in supercilious disregard of the destiny of man but "a Being who is the infinite in Man, the Father, the Friend, the Lover, whose service must be realized through serving all mankind" (ib.). He reminds us the question that was asked by the sages of the ancient India, "Who is the God to whom we must bring our oblation?", and Tagore remarks: "The question is still ours, and to answer it we must know in the depth of our love and the maturity of our wisdom what man is – know him not only in sympathy but in *science*, in the joy of creation and in the pain of heroism" (ib.). Although a great humanist, Tagore was not averse to science as he was neither dogmatic nor obscurantist in his understanding of the contemporary human situation. He combined in a remarkable way the ideal and the practical. He never lived in an ivory tower. He knew that it is on account of the industrial revolution that

the West was able to cater to the material needs of the masses, improve the standard of living and give them comfort and complacency. Hence his acceptance of and emphasis on science. But he knew also that mechanical implantation of science dries up the soul. He observed in "Union of Cultures": "Commodities multiply, markets spread, and tall buildings pierce the sky. Not only so, but in education, healing and the amenities of life, man also gains success. That is because the machine has its own truth. But this very success makes the man who is obsessed by its mechanism, hanker for more and more mechanism. And as the greed continually increases, he has less and less compunction in lowering man's true value to the level of his own machine" (EWT 6:575). We should not allow machine to be our master and control our life. Tagore believed that man, "the angel of the surplus" needs the joy of creation for the sustenance of the soul and fulfilment of the self. Hence his insistence on the creation and promotion of handicrafts which combine the aesthetic and the utilitarian and thereby help the artisan economically. The handicrafts thus serve a number of purposes. It keeps the cultural heritage alive and promotes cultural nationalism. It gives the artisan a joy of creation and it helps him financially. It is with this end in view that Tagore established an organization at Sriniketan to promote handicrafts. The global demand for handicrafts today as valuable cultural artefacts only reaffirms Tagore's conviction of the need for humanistic values. It was Tagore, again, who in order to redress the sufferings of the peasants introduced cooperative farming and was one of the pioneers in community development and cooperative enterprises which have become part of modern existence in the world today.

Another important aspect of the myriad minded Tagore which has also a great relevance to Tagore's humanism is his theoretical and practical ideas of education. Tagore expresses his credo: "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" (ib. 4: 401). Incidentally this idea later crystallized in the form of the educational institution at Santiniketan. About his educational mission Tagore said:

I refuse to believe that human society has reached its limit of moral possibility. And we must work all our strength for the seemingly

impossible, and must believe that there is a constant urging in the depth of human soul for the attainment of the perfect, the urging which secretly helps us in our entire endeavour for the good. This faith has been my only asset in the educational mission which I have made my life's work, and almost unaided and alone, I struggle along my path. I try to assert in my words and works that *education has only its meaning and object in freedom-* freedom from ignorance about the laws of universe, and freedom from passion and prejudice in our communication with the human world. (EWT 7:832–833. Emphasis added).

The matchless profundity and incredible vastness of Tagore's writings, his dynamic personality and intensely lived life make it almost impossible to sum up any of his ideas within the length of an essay.

The Romans used to call a poet *vates*, a seer and that is what the writings of Tagore make us feel. A fine figure of a sage with ascetic majesty Tagore had the far reaching vision of a *vates* and the capacity to translate that vision into reality. It is his lifelong pursuit of humanism through his writings and actions that gives substance to that vision.

What Matthew Arnold said about Shakespeare holds equally true about Tagore: "Others abide our question. Thou art free". The brief sketch above can only give a rough idea of his humanism.

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[Note: All the English renderings of the Bengali texts are done by the present author.]